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November 30, 1999

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Appearing in "The Triumph of Love"

IWU Student showcases talent developed from travels to Russia, London

"He was a dark, handsome man with gray hair and a black mustache. As I spoke his imposing figure stared at me with an inquisitive, yet condescending expression on his face. Although it was only his portrait, Konstantin Stanislavsky was quite intimidating."
"

Shannon Hoag, a senior, theatre arts major at Illinois Wesleyan University and cast member of the current IWU production "The Triumph of Love," was speaking of her experience performing in the ballroom named for Russia's father of theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky. Hoag was in Moscow, Russia, for the fall semester of 1998, studying theatre as part of the National Theatre Institute (NTI). The program consisted of three weeks of study at the Moscow Art Theatre founded by Stanislavsky and director Vladimir Nemirovich - Danchenko followed by intense study at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Conn.

Hoag's interest in Russian theater and technique was sparked when she read Stanislavsky's book, "An Actor Prepares," for the class, "Beginning Scene and Character Study," taught by John Ficca, IWU professor of theatre arts. Ever since, Hoag has "read it like a Bible."

Hoag always knew she wanted to study abroad and when traveling to Moscow was a choice, it was an opportunity she could not pass up. Stanislavsky's book took on new meaning during Hoag's studies in Moscow. The book is set in Stanislavsky's ballroom in the Moscow Art Theatre, and, upon arriving in Russia, Hoag and her classmates were able to perform in the ballroom.

"Our class was one of the first American groups to take classes in Stanislavsky's ballroom," Hoag said. "It was eerie because in the back of the room there was that portrait of Stanislavsky. When I had to perform the monologue in the ballroom, it felt as if he was there staring at me and judging my performance."

First Two IWU Students to Study in Russia

Along with Anne Gaynor a 1999 graduate from River Forest, Ill. these two actresses were the first IWU students to study in Russia as part of the NTI, a highly competitive program that looks for a proven ability to handle the demands of disciplined theater

work. Founded in 1970, the Connecticut-based NTI aims to expose young, theater artists to intensive conservatory-based training and provide orientation into professional theater. NTI challenges the student to develop the actor's instruments--body, voice, imagination and discipline--everyday.

In addition to the written application, all applicants must be interviewed. The total cost of the program is approximately \$12,400, which includes room and board, tuition and travel fees. Financial aid is limited, and applicants are encouraged to determine whether existing student loans, scholarships and grants can be applied to NTI.

"It is an expensive program, but it is an investment in my future," Hoag said.

Moscow Curriculum

The curriculum for the Moscow semester allowed Hoag to take classes that emphasized acting, Russian history, movement and voice and design. Acting classes focused on all phases of acting technique with a special emphasis on the style that characterizes Russian Theater. Movement and voice classes taught vocal technique, production and singing, mime, classical folk dance, scenic movement and ballet. Design classes gave Hoag an introduction to the work of the great Russian designers--both traditional and experimental. However, because Russians believed Stanislavsky was the father of Russian theater, much of what Hoag learned in Russia focused on Stanislavsky. The core of Stanislavsky's technique was creating one person in the actor and the character to make the audience believe in the actor's performance.

Hoag reached a new level of understanding for Russian acting and performance through her experiences. Learning Stanislavsky's technique " was a great way to start off the time in Russia because we all had to shed the external baggage we carried around," Hoag said. "You cannot be shy or inhibited in Russia. You have to lay it all on the line." The connections enable the actor to help tell the story of the particular character and tell the story of the playwright in a clear way--the way he or she intended.

Stanislavsky Method

Stanislavsky, who died in Moscow on Aug. 7, 1938, believed that actors in realistic plays should "incarnate their roles, should live the parts." He decided that a technique was needed that would guide the actor and create a "favorable condition for the appearance of inspiration." His system does not consist of a fixed set of rules but of practical approaches to the physical and mental preparation of the actor and to the creation of the character.

Stanislavsky's system includes helping the actor learn to relax and avoid distraction and develop his or her imagination to memorize sensory details of past emotions and

recreate those emotions on stage. His system also emphasizes the development of a naïveté, as well as a belief in the imagined truth of the stage.

Stanislavsky aimed his technique to make the performer's outward activities natural and convincing. The actor or actress must convey the inner truth of the part, make the life of the character on-stage dynamic and develop a strong sense of the ensemble.

"Russians emphasize ensemble-based acting," Hoag said. "There is a distinct emphasis on spiritual and concentration. The intellectual and emotional connection between cast members in Russia is much more profound than in the United States. In the United States, we perceive the cast as a family. But, in Russia, you must build the connection and learn how to make connections with the other cast members. It is a much deeper relationship."

"There is a wonderful energy from the ensemble," Hoag added. "Everything is very physical, and there is no holding back. You can feel the emotion with every movement. If the script says to embrace or to kiss, you can feel the meaning and the emotion behind the action. This really emphasizes Stanislavsky's idea that a person must become the character."

In addition to learning Stanislavsky's technique, students also were able to absorb the Russian culture. Hoag was immersed in art and Russian culture and was able to see it through the many theater performances she attended. According to Hoag, Moscow is alive with many exciting theaters, opera houses, concert halls and museums. Every student in the NTI program is expected to frequently attend the theater, opera, ballet and concerts. Tickets are provided as an integral part of the cultural program. "We attended many plays and performances in Russia. All of them were in Russian, but we could understand what was going on because we could feel the emotion from the actors," Hoag said.

Contemporary Russia

Despite the turmoil, poverty and chaos taking place in Russia during her visit, she felt safe in Russia. "I came over right after the ruble fell, and, although the nation was in chaos, I felt comfortable enough to absorb myself in the culture," Hoag said.

Living in Russian culture was an eye-opening experience for Hoag. Not only did she learn acting, but she learned from her experiences with Russian life. "It really made me see what Americans take for granted and how young the American culture is compared to the centuries of Russian culture and history. It was a very large history lesson. You learn that people are not really all that different, but, yet, they're really not all the same."

Hoag did not experience any anti-American sentiment during her stay in Russia. In fact, she found that "the people have a lot of respect for students and those taking initiative to educate themselves."

"The Russian people," Hoag said, "did not talk down to us, but they rather liked to practice their English on us."

Russian National Character

Hoag noticed that the Russian people command respect because they respect their country. "They value their history and the struggles they have overcome. The Russians are very nationalistic and proud people. They are proud of their history," Hoag said.

An experience that emphasized just how proud the Russians are of their culture was when Hoag visited the Kremlin.

"Visiting the armory was ironic because the nation is very poor, but, yet, in the middle of Red Square are the crown jewels," Hoag explained. "There was such a large display of wealth in the middle of such poverty. All the stars on the ground around the Kremlin are genuine rubies. You'd think if they used one of those rubies to settle the debts of the nation, they could improve the standard of living. However, doing such a thing would be violating part of Russian history."

Theatre Boot Camp

Following the three weeks in Russia, students enrolled in the NTI program returned to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. "The remainder of the semester in Connecticut was like 'theater boot camp,'" Hoag said. Each day began at 7 a.m. and ended at 10 p.m. Students took classes such as ballet, yoga, tai chi, Russian movement, acting class, playwriting, directing, scene design, and movement. The program was so demanding that some days required Hoag and her classmates to prepare an entire act of a play in two days. "The attitude and environment, however, made it feasible," Hoag said.

The time in Russia and Connecticut differed in some ways for Hoag. Students went to Russia to learn the fundamental ensemble technique and to experience the art and culture of the city of Moscow. "The intensity of the work was the same in both Russia and Connecticut, however, there was no time to take in the scenery during the stay at Connecticut," Hoag said. Students did, however, get to take an excursion to New York City and go behind the scenes of "Side Man," a Broadway play, and meet actor Christian Slater.

Appeal of Travel

Once Hoag finished the NTI program, she knew she'd caught the travel bug and needed to continue her education. "Once I got back to the states, I decided to study at the

London Academy of Theatre through Rutgers University, because I knew I had to be away again," Hoag said. Hoag recommends that students travel abroad as part of their educational curriculum.

"Traveling is really empowering because you cultivate the desire to find knowledge," Hoag said. "It makes you aware of the world. Traveling can really open your mind."

London, Russia: Different Acting Styles

Through her travels, she learned that London and Russia have very different acting styles. "London is very intellectual and the emphasis is on how you say the words, not what you say. In Russia, acting is very emotional. Studying in Russia and then in London was probably the most schizophrenic experience in my life," said Hoag. Hoag chose to travel to London to see how Stanislavsky's concepts could be applied to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's sonnets and passages are the way he communicates and describes feelings. "Stanislavsky's theories apply to Shakespeare because the actor must make Shakespeare's words real, truthful and believable," Hoag said.

The curriculum in London was just as intense as the NTI program in Russia and Connecticut. However, the London program, was much more disciplined and structured and focused almost entirely on the works of Shakespeare. "The English are very protective of Shakespeare," said Hoag.

Triumph of Love

Now that Hoag is back from her travels, she can apply Stanislavsky's techniques to her performances at IWU. Hoag is involved in "The Triumph of Love", a French farce written in 1792 by lawyer, novelist, and playwright, Pierre Marivaux, appearing in IWU's McPherson Theatre Nov. 18, 19, 20 and Dec. 2, 3, and 4 at 8 p.m. In addition to being the publicity coordinator, Hoag plays the role of Leontine, a philosopher who scorns love because it takes away from academia. Leontine's mission is to find love in her character.

"'The Triumph of Love' characters are really larger than life," Hoag said. "However, the characters all must be honest and truthful, which is fundamental in Stanislavsky's teachings." In this play, the more honest and truthful the characters are, the funnier the play. Stanislavsky's theories apply more to dramas than comedies, although the actors still need to find the truth in comedies.

In addition, Hoag is applying what she learned in London to her role in "The Triumph of Love." The teachings in London emphasized diction, speaking voice and communication. "It is easy to get lost in the emotional world of the play, but it is very important to remember to project and use proper diction. The play is so much about wit

that the actor's thought process must be quick so that the delivery is clear and rapid," Hoag said .

Following her work in the "The Triumph of Love," Hoag plans to work on her senior project examining Russian theater. After finishing the project, she would like to return to Russia for three months for intensive study, including Russian language classes. Hoag also would like to put together a one-woman show featuring the love letters written between playwright Anton Chekhov and his wife.

Hoag's ideal goal is to go to New York and play out the actor's life of seeking out auditions and waitressing to support her career. "I have seen the dream in the people of Russia," Hoag said. "That experience taught me that if people in Russia can live a dream, then I can do it in the land of opportunity."